

## ***The Indianapolis Journal* (Indianapolis, IN), 14 Jan. [1882]<sup>1</sup>**

✂ *The copy text omits the start of what appears to be a letter from a correspondent in New York.*

Here, at 10 o'clock, comes Oscar Wilde, from a dinner at Mrs. John Bigelow's. There are murmurs of curiosity and craning necks to see him while he removes his plum-colored ulster in the reception-room; and the crowded guests surge aside to give passage as Mrs. Croly leads him up the parlors and presents him to Mrs. Alcott.<sup>2</sup> The apparition of him creates a ripple of not impolite amusement. Almost gigantesque in stature and proportion, the eye naturally falls on his lower extremities, formerly [*sic*] known as "legs," encased above the knees in loose trunks of black doeskin, and below the knees in black silk stockings that fit snugly over a pair of very attenuated calves. I have seldom seen slimmer extremities, excepting those which Sarah Bernhardt displays in "Frou Frou." His body is clad in an ordinary swallow-tail coat, with a rim of white linen vest inside the collar, cut very low, leaving a vast expanse of shirt bosom, of fine pique, illuminated with a single pin of three enormous pearls. A large turn-down collar of pique completes the costume, and uncombed hair falls to his shoulders in the most negligent mood imaginable. A white silk handkerchief is stuck in the bosom of the vest.

After general curiosity was satisfied and introductions lapsed, I spoke with the Devotee of Beauty. "How on earth did you and Mr. Ruskin come to break stones on the highway?" I inquired.<sup>3</sup>

"Why, this is it," he said, with spirit, evidently glad to escape from conventional questioning. "One day, when we gathered to the lecture, Mr. Ruskin's audience was very small. It was shortly announced that they were gone to the boat-race. Mr. Ruskin said that exercise was good and necessary, but it seemed too bad that it could not be attained in some really beneficial pursuit. He said he would see if he could not propose something."

"This was at Oxford?" I asked.

"Yes, at my college, Maudlin."

"Maudlin?" I repeated, not remembering any such college.

"Yes," he answered; "'Magdalen,' you call it, but we pronounce it 'Maudlin.'"

1. Included in Colonel Morse's scrapbook from Oscar Wilde's tour of America (British Library, Add MS 81822, f. 56). The headline, the start, and the end of the article, which is apparently a letter from a New York correspondent, has been omitted from Morse's scrapbook.

2. The report is of Jane "Jenny June" Croly's reception for Louisa May Alcott on 8 January 1882. See "New York Gossip," *The Sunday Herald* (Boston, MA), 22 Jan. 1882, 4, repr. *The Complete Interviews*, 700–3, 702.

3. Ruskin's road: see *The Complete Interviews*, 27, note 3.

I did not ask him if it was named after Mary Maudlin, but he went on:

"Next day, Ruskin came to the class, and called our attention to the fact that there was no direct communication between two adjacent villages, and that the inhabitants of one could get to the other only by going far around. He said he was going at work to build a road across the swamp between the villages. He had located it, and was going to work next morning at break of day. If any of the class wished to join, he would cheerfully show them how to break stones and wheel a wheelbarrow."

"Did you laugh at the proposition?"

"No, indeed. We never thought of its being at all fantastic. He was quite serious, and we had for him a feeling of admiration and respect only. Well, next day some forty of us luxurious sluggards got up at dawn and joined him over on the edge of the swamp. We had our hammers, our shovels, our crowbars, and our wheelbarrows, and we speedily learned how to use them. It is not very complicated. For three months we forty—a good part of the class—persevered and stuck together, and all that time Ruskin wheeled earth among us and kept up the most delightful conversation, or rather monologue, on art. It was a profitable season. And at the end of it there was a long mound of earth across that swamp which a lively imagination might fancy was a road."

Just here, Mrs. Croly, who had been waiting for a chance, presented Judge Brady, Ex-Mayor Ely, Commissioner King and Mrs. King, Mary Mapes Dodge, Mrs. Rees, and others.

I was at the reception, on Friday evening, given by Mr. and Mrs. A. A. Hayes and Mr. and Mrs. W. F. Morse at the unique parlors of the former.<sup>1</sup> This was Mr. Wilde's first appearance in New York society. It was in the afternoon, and he appeared in a bright snuff-colored brown suit of melton—long frock coat and pantaloons.

The parlors were furnished in a style quite Oriental. Velvet carpets nearly covered with Turkish rugs; a variety of pretty chairs, with no upholstery; no doors, but everywhere heavy portieres drawn aside; a white crape [*sic*] shawl laid over one sofa and an expensive afghan over another; a camel's-hair shawl of exquisite texture hung upon the wall like tapestry, and an enormous Chinese umbrella, ten feet across, opened in the corner, its great bamboo handle terminating under the table in the middle of the floor. The effect of the whole was that of a bazar. The absence of flowers was rather noticeable. "Where are the flowers?" I said to Mr. Wilde.

"Ah," he replied, "I see very few flowers in America. I am fond of flowers, though not more so than thousands of others. Of course, we young fellows used to go to a ridiculous extreme in all these matters. My room used to be full of lilies. The special reason why we have made the lily and sunflower types, as it were, of our floral taste, is because they are so definitely beautiful, and because they lend themselves so readily to every sort of decoration. The lily is wonderfully graceful—all sorts of lilies—and the sunflow-

1. A. A. Hayes: see *The Complete Interviews*, 51, note 2. W. F. Morse: see *The Complete Interviews*, 47, note 3.

er has an opulent gorgeousness and the true Oriental spirit as it moves and turns its face to the sun. I have seen hardly any flowers since I came here—in the shop windows, the hotels, or even the parlors of the wealthy. In this respect Europe is ahead.”

I asked him if his dress was his ideal of masculine attire?

“No,” he said. “I think everybody should wear knee-breeches.”

“But,” I said, “in regard to color. Your dress is mainly without color—not at all, in this respect, like the showy costume of George IVth. time.”

“I doubt if color is at present attainable,” he said; “perhaps not even desirable. We must make haste slowly. Some slight change in form is nearly all that can be at present effected. We must go no faster than men will follow. Sharp colors would probably not be in good taste, anyhow; the quiet browns and claret colors are very beautiful. I usually wear claret colored velvet myself. Of course when the Brotherhood meet in London we indulge our individual tastes and go to all sorts of extremes.”

“What is your fundamental principle in regard to architecture and decorations?”

“That they should follow the suggestions of nature in her local aspects. The Doric porticos and Corinthian capitals on Fifth avenue are meaningless. In the lands where they originated they were full of meaning, but here they are dead forms—mere mockery. Why should not there spring up in America a new continental architecture, based on golden rod, and asters, and dahlias, and wild azaleas, and daisies, and dandelions, and cactuses, and pines, and magnolias, and prairie flowers, and grasses? Why should not your architecture and all your household decoration be based upon your own flora instead of upon obsolete or arbitrary forms?”

The conversation was a good deal broken by interruptions, but the above is the gist of it.

Of Mr. Wilde’s lecture, the telegraph has told you. He ought to take lessons in elocution. His speech is almost totally without inflection; he bears down upon the accented syllables and skips the unaccented syllables so wholly in his articulation that they are almost inaudible. The speech is not precisely intoned, but it has something of that effect, for the voice does not fall at the end of a sentence, and three or four notes of an octave would include all of its tones.

Enough of society and the Aesthetes.

✂ *The copy text omits the remainder of the article.*